

# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

## **History is never contemporary, for the contemporary is**

perpetually slipping into history, but with some license one may refer to the immediate past as contemporary history. This point possesses some additional justification when the field to which it is applied is that of the world's religions because so much has happened in such a small time in the recent past, so far as this world's religions are concerned. To grasp this point one needs to realize that what may be called the "secular hypothesis" dominated the worldview not only of academia and the media but also the world of politicians and bureaucrats not that long ago. The belief was so widespread as to have been left virtually unarticulated, that religion as a factor in human affairs was either destined to oblivion, as the Communists would have us believe, or destined to retreat into the private realm, as liberal ideology, characterized by capitalism, would have us imagine. Not many cared about the world's religions at the turn of the century, when secularization, hand in hand with globalization, seemed to be proceeding apace, converting the world into both one market and one marketplace of ideas, promising homogeneity as a unifying force for humanity, destined to erode religious diversity as all of us became more like each other. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 could then be treated like a retrogressive hiccup of tradition in this forward march of modernity.

And then something happened. It happened, to be precise, on the 11th of September, 2001, which made a trainwreck of this expectation. An event happened, literally out of the blue, which proved to be a gamechanger, as they say. One wonders how many readers of this anthology remember the day; for those who do, the events are ineffaceable from modern memory, for those who do not they are inseparable from modern history. The foundations of the paradigm on which the modern world rested may also

be said to have collapsed, with the collapse of New York City's twin towers under aerial assault.

What was referred to above as the secular hypothesis was a paradigm characterized by a subtle economic determinism and an equally subtle Western exceptionalism. It held that economic forces were destined to determine the future of humanity, the question of whether they were going to be capitalistic or communistic had already virtually been settled with the end of the Cold War. It could now be said out aloud what was hitherto muttered sotto voce, that the West's immediate past was the world's not so distant future, a future in which the secularity of modernity was set to prevail over the tradition of religiosity as manifested by the world's religions, which seemed engaged in fighting desperate rearguard battles before being overcome by the forces of modernity. But all that changed after September 11, 2001. But not necessarily for the better for our world's religions.

That the destruction of lives and property which occurred on September 11 occurred in the name of a religion produced two important consequences for the world's religions: *that* the world's religions were now in the spotlight, and *that* they were there in a *negative* spotlight, as if a beam of darkness rather than light had been focused on them.

This anthology is an attempt to come to terms with the spotlight now being turned on the world's religions with a special message: Yes, the world's religions are back in the spotlight as the thesis of the inevitable longterm secularization of the world and the marginalization of the world's religions is called into question but *no*, unlike the impression left by the events of September 11, religions are not necessarily a negative force in human affairs. The world's religions are important not because they are a destructive force; they are important because they are a *force* in human affairs (long neglected) which may be harnessed for either good or evil.

Any attempt to harness religion as a positive force must involve the recognition that religion is a *nonrational force* in human affairs. The age of Enlightenment has many achievements to its credit, but in one respect its modern legacy is rather lamentable. By looking at all of life with the binary grid of the *rational* and the *irrational*, it took a toll on the *nonrational* dimension of life, which includes the emotive side of life all the way from family relations to one's relationship with the divine. In order to make these fit into its binary perspective, the age tended to assimilate the *nonrational* to the irrational, thus leading to the neglect of the emotional and transcendental dimensions of life, a neglect which has come to haunt modern civilization. As we now reintegrate religion into our worldview, we might wish to distinguish carefully among three terms: fundamentalism, orthodoxy, and fanaticism. Fundamentalism is a religious tradition's reaction to a perceived loss of power in the public square. Orthodoxy is a religious tradition's response to a perceived loss of piety in the public square. Fanaticism consists of being blinded by the intensity of the luminosity of one's own tradition by standing too close to it, instead of seeing the whole world transfigured in its light. These phenomena sometimes mimic one another but need to be identified correctly so that the proper corrective can be set in play in the form of their exposure to political pluralism, social pluralism, and religious pluralism respectively.

It was stated earlier that religion could be harnessed not only for good but also evil. This theme is explored in the early chapters of part 1, wherein the relationship of religion to conflict and terror is analyzed, as also its relation to war, and therefore, by extension, peace. For it must not be overlooked, as many modern works which chronicle the darker side of religion tend to, that religion has *also* been a positive factor in human affairs. Judaism introduced the world to the concept of ethical monotheism; Christianity put an end to the gory gladiatorial spectacles of the Roman world; Islam put an end to female infanticide in Arabia. Hinduism has promoted religious toleration; Buddhism has similarly promoted nonviolence; and Sikhism, active charity. In China, Confucianism gave to moderation an emotional force which it has only recently acquired in the West, and Taoism provides a philosophy which is being drawn upon to undergird modern ecological considerations.

That it will be this positive side of religion (and not the negative) which will play a role in securing human flourishing (rather than undermining it) is highlighted in part 2, which focuses on the relationship of religion and human rights. This attempt to positively associate religion with human rights can be traced back to the Project on Religion and Human Rights. The seeds planted by the project in 1993 have now produced a virtually global harvest of constructive engagement between religion and human rights. Nowhere is it more visible than in the field of gender, as is obvious from part 3. The inclusion of the perspective of gender paves the way for broadening the discussion to include the discussion, in part 4, of religion and the environment, given the growth and consolidation of ecofeminism.

In the next three parts of the book, the perspective is more inward-looking, as the issues the world's religions face as such come into focus. Part 5 thus deals with religion and diversity. It emphasizes the need to face pluralism, for if there is anything which obviously characterizes the world of religion, it is not merely the diversity represented by the different religious traditions but also the internal diversity which characterizes these traditions. But how then is such vibrant diversity to be precisely dealt with? An attempt is made to provide the answer in part 6 in terms of encouraging dialogue, as is obvious from the full rubric of this part of the book: "Religion and Transformation: Interreligious Dialogue."

In the final part—namely, part 7—this contemporary reader looks to the future. Many readers will perhaps feel enticed, and perhaps even rewarded, by the various chapters included in this part. Modern discourse on religion has witnessed the emergence of a significant contrast, perhaps even an antithesis in this respect, between *religion* and *spirituality*. Numerous surveys have documented a rise in the number of people who are eager to describe themselves as "spiritual" and reluctant to describe themselves as "religious." Normally, the "spiritual" is considered one dimension of religion, alongside the doctrinal, the mythical, the ritual, and so on. These surveys, however, point in a different direction. The layperson, as distinguished from the academic, increasingly identifies religion with the authoritarianism and rigidity associated with religion as an institution and rejects this form of religion in favour of "spirituality,"

which has come to stand for a freedom to search for the meaning of life on one's own terms and without being necessarily bound to any one single tradition in doing so. This part deals with the more evocative of the two terms, namely, *spirituality*, and tries to describe the contours of the various developments occurring in this area that are likely to play an important role in the future.

Although the various parts of the book have been outlined above, the book must be viewed as greater than the sum of the parts, for it points, as a whole, to two vital areas of human concern which are likely to persist. The first has to do with the nature of the human condition. Modern thinking has moved as far as possible in regarding the human being as a *secular* human being; just as the earlier ages had moved as far as possible in regarding the human being as a *religious* human being. Any fresh thinking on the human condition after September 11 must learn to do justice to both these dimensions of the human condition, as it is clear that excessive movement in one direction tends to create a countervailing force in the other.

The second has to do with how humanity is going to proceed to settle its differences. Interestingly, humanity has done a fairly good job of settling its difference within national boundaries, as illustrated by the effectiveness with which law and order is maintained within a nation, alongside a democratic political structure. The events of September 11 are the most dramatic illustration, since World War II, of its failure to do so across national (and perhaps also civilizational) borders. These two issues may be said to provide the fundamental template of the book, as constituting the two ends of its spine as it were. These issues are going to remain with us for a long time. They were thrown into high relief by the events of September 11. This book represents a disciplined "groping" for a solution to these problems in its aftermath.